

*Principes*, 27(2), 1983, pp. 77-80

## O. F. Cook and Palms\*

VELVA E. RUDD

*Senior Research Fellow, Department of Biology, California State University,  
Northridge, California 91330*

I first met Dr. O. F. Cook in the fall of 1938 when I signed up for a course in the History of Botany that he was offering in the United States Department of Agriculture Graduate School. This was shortly after I arrived in Washington, D.C. to work in the U.S.D.A. Cotton Laboratory. Dr. Cook had been retired from the Department in the spring of 1937 but continued to maintain an office and come to work every day.

Our course in the History of Botany started out conventionally, paying the usual respects to Theophrastus, the herbalists, Linnaeus, and other early botanists, but by the second session it developed into a history of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, especially of the Bureau of Plant Industry. It was a wonderful orientation course for a new employee.

Dr. Cook was one of the pioneer members of the U.S.D.A. staff, having joined the Department in 1898. During his many years of employment there, he was variously concerned with cotton, rubber, and plant introduction in general, especially of tropical plants. He traveled extensively in tropical America and also the Old World, at least Africa, China, and Japan. His interests and curiosity were unlimited. In addition to his work with economic plants like rubber and cotton, he became an authority on such diverse subjects as fungi, genetics, sociology, linguistics, ethnology, millepedes, and palms.

The study of palms early became one

of Dr. Cook's favorite fields of interest. As a native of New York State he probably saw his first live palm trees, other than potted palms, in Liberia in connection with one of his trips there for the New York State Colonization Society. I have not seen his reports to the Society, so do not know what mention he may have made. I have seen photographs that he took of Liberian palms.

So far as I know, Dr. Cook's first published paper on palms appeared September 24, 1901, on the "Origin and Distribution of the Cocoa Palm." In this he presented his theory that the coconut palm is an American species and that the original habitat might be in northwestern South America. The paper is interesting to read whether one agrees with his ideas or not.

Dr. Cook's second paper on palms appeared a month later, October 26, 1901. It was "A Synopsis of the Palms of Puerto Rico." In this he appears to have published his first new genera and new species of palms. Not all the names have stood up against the opinion of other palm taxonomists. In general, Dr. Cook was what we call a splitter. He recognized more species and genera than most botanists and divided the palms into 13 families. As he explained to me once, "I think I notice differences more than other people." The thickness of the trunk or the droop of the leaves would catch his eye. Sometimes a new species or genus was indicated, sometimes not.

The third paper on palms published by Dr. Cook was "Palms from the Bahamas," included in the *Flora of New Providence and Andros* by Mrs. Alice R. Northrop. In this he recognized five gen-

\* Modified from notes for a brief talk on O. F. Cook at The Palm Society meeting at the Fairchild Tropical Garden in 1966.

era and five species, two of the genera and three of the species new to science. Two other species were not named beyond the genus due to inadequate material.

By looking at Dr. Cook's bibliography it is obvious that his work on palms could not have been pursued on a full time basis. Of a total of nearly 400 papers published during the 60 years 1887-1947 only 44 were on palms. Of these more than a third were published during the decade after he retired and could choose his subjects.

I will not enumerate here all the papers written by Dr. Cook, as they appear in a following list. They deal with a great range of genera, including the coconuts, ivory palms, palmettos, royal palms, washingtonias, and numerous new ones. Apropos of *Washingtonia*, he horrified some of his botanical colleagues by publishing the name of a new species, *Washingtonia arizonica*, in a newspaper, The Morning Sun, Yuma, Arizona. These same colleagues were much cheered when they found that the Arizona species was the same as *Washingtonia filifera* of California. The *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature* now states definitely that publication in nonscientific newspapers does not constitute effective publication. (Actually, Dr. Cook intended to publish a longer paper about *Washingtonia arizonica* and I have seen his rough draft notes on the species and how it compares with the other washingtonias.)

One new taxon that especially seemed to please Dr. Cook was his *Rooseveltia frankliniana* from Cocos Island off the coast of Costa Rica. The island was so named because it was thought to be covered with coconut palms. Later it was reported that the palms in the interior of the island appeared to be different. No collections of specimens were made except for one leaf. One day in 1938 Dr. Cook happened to mention to Dr. Waldo Schmitt, a zoologist at Smithsonian Institution, that he had seen in the herbarium

in San Francisco that single leaf from Cocos Island that he believed was a new species. "What a coincidence," Dr. Schmitt exclaimed, "tomorrow I leave for Cocos Island on a cruise with President Roosevelt!" As a result of that conversation, with the aid of members of the Navy crew, a large amount of specimen material was obtained. That palm is now generally conceded to be a *Euterpe*, as, indeed Dr. Cook had referred to it earlier, but he seemed to be tickled by his name *Rooseveltia*. He had wanted to make it "*Franklinia roosevelti*" but there already was another tree named *Franklinia*.

Dr. Cook was very interested in the use of palms as ornamentals. At least two of his last papers were on household palms. He was pleased with the palm room at the Botanical Garden in Washington, D.C. which, I gathered, he had helped to arrange. He also must have been hopeful that some palms could be grown out of doors in the Washington area. I have found among his miscellaneous papers a yellow sheet of notes entitled "Palms outdoors in Washington City." He apparently was speculating that palmettos hardy enough for North Carolina might also survive in Washington. Attached to those notes is a newspaper clipping (undated) headed "Washington parks testing ground for exotic shrubs." The article stated, "Washington parks will become a proving ground for many varieties of exotic South American shrubs, vines, and flowering plants this summer as a result of President Roosevelt's visit to the Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires in December, 1936. . . . President Roosevelt expressed interest in the parks of the countries visited. . . . Upon his return to Washington he asked Secretary of the Interior Ickes and Secretary of Agriculture Wallace to send experts of their departments to South America to survey park planting and landscaping there and to study the possibilities of importing foreign plants for use in the

parks of this country. . . ." (This was an earlier beautification project sponsored by the U.S. government before Lady Bird Johnson.) Apparently Dr. Cook never did finish the paper. Probably all those exotic plants froze and ended the project.

Whether or not Dr. Cook's classification of the palms was correct, he made a great contribution in the collection of material, living plants for the greenhouse, and herbarium specimens with copious field notes and excellent photographs so that the taxa could be studied scientifically. He collected pickled material for morphological studies but lacked the time and help to work on it. (He tried to persuade the management to put me on as his assistant but was unsuccessful; being retired, he did not rate staff assistance.) Much of the material (specimens, photographs, and notes) has been unavailable for some time but is now in the Smithsonian Institution.

After Dr. Cook retired he suffered the usual fate of a retiree and was moved to successively smaller offices, so that it was increasingly difficult to keep his books, papers, and specimens in convenient order. He was further handicapped because the administrative people looked upon files of any sort—plants, notes, photographs—as storage material to be relegated to the limbo of a basement or attic and, eventually, discarded. Some of Dr. Cook's specimens were at U.S.D.A., others at the Smithsonian in cases labelled, "Do not disturb. Mr. Cook working on them." After he died, I took charge of them. Subsequently, the late Dr. W. A. Archer, then at the National Arboretum Herbarium, U.S.D.A., helped to retrieve more of Dr. Cook's material that was scheduled for oblivion.

I became better acquainted with Dr. Cook in about 1941 when I went to work in the herbarium of the Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction of the U.S.D.A. and was assigned an office next door to Dr. Cook's. Then I found out more

about how he worked and organized his reference material. That was when he tried to persuade B. Y. Morrison to assign me to him.

At best, Dr. Cook maintained a messy office. (I say, at best—actually I never did see it when he was a regular staff member and had a secretary.) However disorganized it appeared, though, he knew where everything was. At home his wife tried to tidy his things, much to his distress. As he said, "my wife is neat, but I am orderly." Because my own style is somewhat similar to Dr. Cook's I was cheered by his remarks. From him I learned that no matter how high papers were piled on one's desk, if just one slider was kept clear, one could carry on comfortably.

Dr. Cook's method of working, at least in the later years when I knew him, was to sit at his cluttered desk, with the one slider clear of all but pencil and yellow paper and a knife and pine knot or branch that he had picked up in the woods at home. As he meditated on his ideas and choice of words, he would carve away, shaping those pieces of wood, sometimes producing a little bowl, sometimes making a picture frame, or, more often, just an interesting, artistic piece, that he would take home to grace the parlor, dining room, etc. When he was trying to promote the idea of my being his assistant some irreverent person said, "you would probably both sit and whittle." Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to try my hand at it.

Publications on palms by Orator Fuller Cook (1867-1949) compiled from Bibliography of Palms and Cycads on punch cards at the L. H. Bailey Hortorium, Cornell University, and Fairchild Tropical Garden.

COOK, O. F.

1900. The method of types in botanical nomenclature. *Science*, ser. 2, 12: 478-479.  
 1901a. The origin and distribution of the cocoa palm. *Contr. U.S. Natl. Herb.* 7: 257-293.

- 1901b. A synopsis of the palms of Puerto Rico. Bull. Torrey Bot. Club 28: 525-569, *pl.* 43-48.
1902. Palms of the Bahamas. In Alice R. Northrop, Flora of New Providence and Andros. Mem. Torrey Bot. Club 12: 19-26.
1903. Economic plants of Porto Rico. Contro. U.S. Natl. Herb. 8: 57-269, *pl.* 13.
1904. The nomenclature of the royal palms. Bull. Torrey Bot. Club 31: 349-355.
- 1910a. Relationships of the ivory palms. Contr. U.S. Natl. Herb. 13: 133-141, *fig.* 42-44.
- 1910b. History of the coconut palm in America. Contr. U.S. Natl. Herb. 14: 271-342, IX-XIII, *pl.* 52-66.
- 1913a. A new ornamental palmetto in southern Texas. U.S.D.A. Bur. Pl. Industry Circ. 113: 11-14.
- 1913b. Ivory palms in Panama. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 3: 138-143.
- 1913c. Relationships of the false date-palm of the Florida Keys, with a synoptical key to the families of American palms. Contr. U.S. Natl. Herb. 16: 243-254, *pl.* 74-77.
- 1915a. Date palm allies in America. J. Heredity 6: 117-122, *fig.* 8-10.
- 1915b. A new genus of palms allied to *Archontophoenix*. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 5: 116-122.
- 1915c. *Glaucothea*, a new genus of palms from lower California. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 5: 236-241.
- 1917a. The Mascarene cabbage palm as a new genus. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 7: 121-127.
- 1917b. Seedling morphology in palms and grasses. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 7: 420-425.
- 1923a. *Opsiandra*, a new genus of palms growing on Maya ruins in Peten, Guatemala. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 13: 179-184.
- 1923b. *Pseudophoenix insignis*, a new palm from Haiti, and two other new species from the West Indies. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 13: 397-408, *fig.* 1.
- 1923c. *Washingtonia arizonica*. In Anonymous. Find new species palm Yuma County; botanist from Washington establishes existence of genuine palms at Quartzite. The Morning Sun, Yuma, Arizona, 17(280): 1. 5 Dec 1923.
1926. A new genus of palms based on *Kentia Forsteriana*. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 16: 392-397.
- 1927a. New genera and species of ivory palms from Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 17: 218-230.
- 1927b. *Kentia* palms in California. J. Heredity 18: 297-419, *fig.* 16-25.
1935. Juvenile characters of royal palms. Science 81: 590.
1936. Royal palms in upper Florida. Science 84: 60-61.
- 1937a. A new household palm, *Neanthe bella*. Science 86: 120-122.
- 1937b. Hurricane palms in Florida, including a new genus *Simpsonia*. Science 85: 332-333.
- 1939a. *Bornoa*, an endemic palm of Haiti. Nat. Hort. Mag. 18: 254-280, *fig.* 1-12.
- 1939b. A second household palm, *Omanthe costaricana*. Science 90: 298-299.
- 1939c. A new palm from Cocos Island collected on the presidential cruise of 1938. Smithsonian Misc. Collect. 98: 1-26, *pl.* 1-26.
- 1939d. Young royal palms. Natl. Hort. Mag. 18: 100-115, *fig.* 1-8.
- 1940a. Aublet the botanist, a pioneer against slavery, with a memorial genus of palms. J. Washington Acad. Sci. 30: 294-299, *fig.* 1.
- 1940b. Oil palms in Florida, Haiti, and Panama. Natl. Hort. Mag. 19: 10-35, *fig.* 2-11.
- 1940c. An endemic palm on Cocos Island near Panama mistaken for the coconut palm. Science 91: 140-142.
1941. A Haitian cactus palm adapted to Florida. Natl. Hort. Mag. 20: 21-52.
- 1942a. A new commercial oil palm in Ecuador. Natl. Hort. Mag. 21: 70-85, *fig.* 1-6.
- 1942b. The Brazilian origin for the commercial oil palm. Sci. Monthly 54: 577-590, *illus.*
1943. Household palms and related genera. Natl. Hort. Mag. 22: 93-102, 134-152, *fig.* 1-15.
1946. Africa needs palms as tree crops. Sci. Monthly 62: 131-139.
- 1947a. Cascade palms in southern Mexico. Natl. Hort. Mag. 25: 10-34, *fig.* 1-10.
- 1947b. Climbing and creeping palms in Mexico and Guatemala related to household plants. Natl. Hort. Mag. 26: 215-231, *fig.* 1-8.

## COOK, O. F. AND C. B. DOYLE

1913. Three new genera of stilt palms (Iriarteaceae) from Colombia, with a synoptical review of the family. Contr. U.S. Natl. Herb. 16: 225-238, *pl.* 54-65, *fig.* 41.
1916. Germinating coconuts. J. Heredity 7: 148-157, *fig.* 1-6.
1939. The edible pacaya palm of Alta Vera Paz. Natl. Hort. Mag. 18: 161-179, *fig.* 1-9.

## COOK, O. F. AND J. F. JOYNER

1938. A diminutive palm from Mayaland. Natl. Hort. Mag. 17: 1-12, *fig.* 1-8.
1939. *Neanthe*, a palm for genetic study. J. Heredity 30: 93-103, *fig.* 16-21.